

Interview with
Simon Gonzalez
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There is a fellow who works in a service station where I work named Joe who comes from Mexico and used to be a bracero himself. I have been talking with him about this and he has been telling me plenty of interesting things. One thing he says is that the braceros come from all over Mexico, in fact, the majority come from the states in the southern part and he wonders why this is. Because, he says, in that part of Mexico they can pick all the food they need to eat right off the trees. They have all kinds of fruit. They do not need shoes in that warm climate and so he thinks they really don't need to come to this country unless they were just looking for adventure. He says they are two main types of braceros; those who come here for fun or adventure, or new experience and those who come here for money.

He says that all over Mexico the word has been spread that things are better here in California than in the other states. So consequently, this is the great ambition of all of them. They ~~want to~~ all want to come to California.

Joe also says that although when they come up here they intend to make a small fortune. Most of them are able only to make enough to sustain their families while they are away. The families are so large, you know. Joe says he never heard of anybody who took back enough money to Mexico and who was able to keep it long enough to actually do anything that they had originally planned. All over you heard this big complaint that they are not allowed to stay here long enough to make a real stake. Another thing this fellow says is that he knows very few of these men will ever return to the villages they came from when they get back to Mexico. They hang around the contracting centers in hopes of coming back to the United States just as soon as possible.

Another fellow I talked with, who had some interesting things to say about the bracero program, was a truck driver from Texas. His job is hauling the men from Juarez up to the sugar beets in Colorado and places like that. He seemed to be a nice guy, but, some of the things he told made me think the men have it

pretty tough. Another thing he told me is that the people he works for always put an extra man or two aboard the truck at Juarez. Say the order was for thirty men, they would arrange to put thirty-two men aboard; then at the border where the men know him, they would simply ask 'how many you got this time?', and he'd give them the number he was supposed to have, let us say thirty, and ~~that~~ would ~~that~~ be that. He would have no more trouble getting them up to Colorado.

There can be no doubt that lots of braceros are staying in the country one way or another. It is common practice for them to marry an American girl because this makes it easier for them to get ~~avisa~~ a ~~visa~~ visa. And they do this even though most of them already have a wife down in Mexico, then as soon as they get their papers, often they will just walk out on the new wife they have up here. Some probably realize what they are doing, but, many of them sincerely seem to feel that being in a new country, the old laws no longer apply and if you were to ask them they would tell you that they are not doing anything wrong and the would mean it.

I will give you another example of how easy it is to get into the country legally. I had a distant relative who wanted very much to come into this country but he wasn't able to get the assurance of a job that ~~is~~ he is supposed to have before he can get a visa. What he did was go to Juarez and it wasn't long before he found a man who said he would fix up all the necessary papers, if he paid him \$50, over and above the usual costs of a visa. Well, he had a little trouble getting the money but he finally paid him and got his papers without any trouble.

I just happened to think of a time last winter when I happened to be over at the house of my boss about 11 o'clock or 11:30 one night. We were just sitting around talking, when we noticed three nationals walking down the sidewalk. You could tell they were nationals because of the broad-brim hats they were wearing. My boss started talking to them and found out that they had jumped the border and had walked all the way to Riverside, keeping three or four miles from the highway. All the way they just slept on the ground at night, this is very dangerous you

know, because in addition to the heat of the desert during the day, you are liable to be bitten by snakes at night. Well, anyway, my boss asked the fellows if they would like to come in for a bit to eat and they said "Oh, No, señor, we are not hungry." But my boss had a little suspicion, so he said, "when was the last time you ate?" They said in Mexicali, three days ago. So my boss said "you must be hungry, won't you come in and let us give you something to eat." "Oh, no señor, it would be too much trouble for you wife." they answered. Well, finally after a lot more persuasion he managed to talk them into coming into the kitchen. They were hungry all right. Just as soon as something was put on their plate they would gobble it up. We asked them where they were going and they said farther up north. They knew that the farther north they got the less likelihood they would be caught. Also they had probably heard from somebody that had returned to Mexico, that the wages were better up north.

Last Sunday I drove down to Hemet because I had heard some of the men in the Riverside bracero camp saying how glad they were that they were not down there. They said everybody in that area ends up getting 75¢ an hour no matter what kind of work they are doing and ~~most~~ no matter what kind of rate of pay they are supposed to be getting. What happens is that if they are on a piece-rate, let us say, and are unusually fast pickers and are able to average maybe \$1 an hour, the foreman or somebody else who handles their pay, takes a little bite out of it; so that when it gets to them it amounts to exactly 75¢ an hour. Well, I drove down to Hemet to see if I could check on this, to see if this was true. I didn't find out exactly, but, I did see some very interesting things. For example, I got to talking ~~to~~ with a crew of six men, four of them were loading apricots out in the orchards onto trucks and the other two were working in an apricot cutting shed. These guys were practically killing themselves. There were going to work at 7 in the morning or maybe even earlier. They didn't get finished until 6 at night and they were working 7 days a week. It appeared that each man was doing the work that ordinarily would be done by two men. Several had had to drop out of the loading work because it was simply too hard

hoist those boxes onto the truckbeds all day and the men in the shed were dashing around like crazy men trying to keep up with the work. The women who were cutting the apricots told me that they were sometimes afraid that these men were going to faint, they looked so tired, and I can believe it. I wish I had had a camera there and taken a picture of the expressions on their faces. This was in the late afternoon and they were really done in. All these men were making 75¢ an hour. I didn't have much time to talk with them, but I had plenty of chance to learn that they were very unhappy and didn't want to come back to the United States under these conditions again.

The growers are really anxious to get every minutes' work possible out of the braceros. There is one right around this area that I happen to know about ~~x~~ who hires a boy to take the men's lunches from the truck to the tree where the man happens to be working at noon so the man won't spend any time getting his own lunch, the truck may be parked a couple of hundred yards away you see. The boy also takes water around from ~~the~~ man to man at noon so the men won't lose any time getting a drink. What if they want a drink in the middle of the morning or the middle of the afternoon?, "That's tough, brother."